

Women of the World Festival: Celebrity, Solidarity, and Activism

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Winnie M Li is a first-year PhD researcher in the Dept of Media and Communications, focusing on the impact of social media and storytelling on the public dialogue about rape. She is also writes for The Huffington Post about sexual assault, and this year, she co-founded the [Winnie238x238](#) Clear Lines Festival, the UK's first-ever festival dedicated to talking about sexual assault and consent through the arts and discussion. The festival was entirely crowd-funded, and brought together over 60 artists, speakers, comedians, and journalists to engage with the public on the issue.

@Winniemi

When activists and survivors come together at large-scale events like the Oscars or arts festivals to protest an issue, what kind of solidarity is created? And is this show of solidarity a form of media power?

This weekend, I'll be speaking at the [Women of the World Festival](#) (WOW) at the Southbank Centre in London. I'll be just one of hundreds of women and men speaking, performing, and giving testimony at the increasingly popular festival, which takes place annually around International Women's Day (March 8th) to champion gender equality. Past speakers have included Malala Yousafzi, Alice Walker, Salma Hayek, Gordon Brown MP, Christine Lagarde, and Patrick Stewart — and this year, Annie Lennox, Eve Ensler, and Caitlin Moran are among those gracing the line-up. But whether you're a Hollywood star, a former Prime Minister, or just an activist and PhD student like myself, there is a sense of community that resides in so many people coming together to fight for gender equality. It's energizing, inspiring, and it reminds you that you're not alone in experiencing some of the inequality you've faced in your lifetime. In fact, at least half of the human race has experienced gender inequality, too — and the burden for change shouldn't fall on women alone.

My own particular 'cause' within the eco-system of gender inequality is challenging rape and sexual assault. As a rape survivor, I've spent the past few years encouraging a more productive, more open conversation about sexual abuse and consent through social media, the mainstream media, and public engagement. Last year I launched the [Clear Lines Festival](#) the UK's first-ever arts and discussion festival dedicated to addressing this issue, and at WOW on Saturday, March 12th, I'll be speaking on the [Sexual Assault and Abuse: Giving Testimony](#) panel (11:15am – 12:15pm) and then chairing the [Discussion Group on Sexual Assault and Abuse](#) (12:30-1:45pm) on behalf of Clear Lines.

I strongly believe that there is a certain power that is created when so many survivors of sexual assault and abuse come together to give testimony. The sheer statistics of sexual assault are sobering: in England and Wales, the equivalent of ten women are raped each hour. The long-lasting impact of such an experience is rarely captured in the media. And the individual stories of each of these statistics are rarely given voice.

But all that is changing. Last week at the Oscars, 50 survivors of campus sexual assault stepped onto the stage when Lady Gaga performed her nominated song 'Til it Happens to You' and three films directly addressing gender-based violence won Oscars (*Spotlight*, *Room*, and *A Girl in the River*). In my [recent article](#) for *The Huffington Post*, I wrote about the significant of this — and especially of celebrities like Lady Gaga, Kesha, and Joan Collins coming forward as rape survivors.

Celebrities wield more media power than the rest of us, and when they use this power to bear witness to their own experiences of gender inequality, the solidarity among activists can only increase.

Winnie M Li is a writer, rape survivor, and PhD researcher at the London School of Economics. Advance

tickets for WOW are sold out, but 100 Day Passes will be sold on the door each day.

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